

Merkel Cell Cancer

Merkel cell cancer, also called neuroendocrine cancer of the skin or trabecular cancer, is a rare type of cancer that develops on or just beneath the skin and in hair follicles. Merkel cell cancer usually appears as firm, painless, shiny skin lumps, or tumors. These tumors are red, pink, or blue in color and vary in size from less than a quarter of an inch to more than two inches. Merkel cell cancer is generally found on the sun-exposed areas of the head and neck, but they may also begin on other parts of the body such as the extremities or trunk.

The cause of Merkel cell cancer is not known. This type of cancer occurs mostly in people between the ages of 60 and 80, but it can occur at other ages as well. The majority of patients with Merkel cell cancer are white.

It is difficult to diagnose Merkel cell cancer because Merkel cells have certain characteristics that resemble cells found in other types of cancers. Before starting treatment, patients should consider a second opinion about the diagnosis and treatment plan. Some insurance companies require a second opinion; others may pay for a second opinion if a patient requests it.

Surgery is the usual treatment for Merkel cell cancer. The tumor is removed along with a border of healthy tissue. Nearby, or regional, lymph nodes are often removed because they may

contain cancer cells. To destroy any remaining cancer cells, radiation therapy may be directed at the site of the surgery.

Merkel cell cancer grows rapidly and often metastasizes (spreads) to other parts of the body. Even relatively small tumors are capable of metastasizing. When the disease spreads, it tends to spread to the regional lymph nodes and may also spread to the liver, bone, lungs, and brain. Merkel cell cancer that has metastasized may respond to treatment with chemotherapy, but this therapy usually does not cure the disease. Early diagnosis and treatment of Merkel cell cancer is an important factor in decreasing the chance of its spread.

Researchers continue to look for more effective ways to treat Merkel cell cancer by conducting clinical trials (research studies). Information about ongoing clinical trials is available from the Cancer Information Service (see below) or from the National Cancer Institute's cancerTrials™ Web site at <http://cancertrials.nci.nih.gov> on the Internet.

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Sources of National Cancer Institute Information

Cancer Information Service

Toll-free: 1-800-4-CANCER (1-800-422-6237)

TTY (for deaf and hard of hearing callers): 1-800-332-8615

NCI Online

Internet

Use <http://www.cancer.gov> to reach NCI's Web site.

CancerMail Service

To obtain a contents list, send e-mail to cancermail@icicc.nci.nih.gov with the word "help" in the body of the message.

CancerFax® fax on demand service

Dial 301-402-5874 and listen to recorded instructions.

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